



## Cuba, the Pending Transition

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**Theme:** This article analyses the question of succession that is already beginning to emerge in Cuba. The key question is whether the regime that replaces the current one will manage to stabilise a new status quo similar to that of China or Vietnam.

**Summary:** Fidel Castro had been in charge in Cuba for more than 47 years. Although a transition –which can only be to democracy– is nowhere in sight, the question of succession is already beginning to emerge. The interim transfer of power to Raúl Castro, signed by his brother Fidel on 31 July, 2006, was an historic milestone. The proclamation of the temporary transfer of power is in itself a document that reveals the almost total power wielded by Fidel. Another thing that stands out is that the proclamation made no mention of the economy in terms of everyday consumption. What kind of political class will surface in Cuba?

### Analysis:

Just like the peasant in the old song who longs to get home to his little hut, there is still no date for when democracy will make it to Cuba. Even so, the interim transfer of power to Raúl Castro, signed by his brother Fidel on 31 July, 2006, was an historic milestone. After all, the Commander had been in charge in Cuba for more than 47 years. Although a transition –which can only be to democracy– is nowhere in sight, the question of succession is already beginning to emerge. Castro seems to have recovered from the intestinal ailment that brought him close to death, but the big question is whether he will return to his job –if not in the same capacity as before, at least enough to prevent changes that in his absence his successors would probably undertake–.

The proclamation of the temporary transfer of power is in itself a document that reveals the almost total power wielded by Fidel. Raúl –Minister of the Revolutionary Armed Forces– took over his brother's posts as head of the Communist Party of Cuba (PCC), the armed forces, the State and the Government. The Commander was also the main force behind the National and International Health Programme, the National and International Education Programme and the Revolutionary Energy Programme. Since 31 July, coordination of these has been in the hands of José Ramón Balaguer Cabrera (public Health Minister), José Ramón Machado Ventura and Esteban Lazo (members of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Cuba.) and Carlos Lage Dávila (Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers), respectively. Finally, Lage, Francisco Soberón Valdés (Minister President of the National Bank of Cuba) and Felipe Pérez Roque (Foreign Minister) make up the commission tasked with managing the funds that correspond to these programmes.

Another thing that stands out is that the proclamation made no mention of the economy in terms of everyday consumption. Fidel has always cared more about the battle against imperialism than the mundane aspirations of everyday Cubans. Otherwise, he would have given priority to economic growth and the people's legitimate interest in raising its living standards. Despite making

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significant social progress, Cuba remains far from satisfying the basic expectations of its people. For decades now, there has been a very popular joke making the rounds in Cuba: what are the three achievements of the revolution? Education, public health and social security. And the three failures? Breakfast, lunch and dinner.

### **Cuba Under the ‘Comandante’**

‘We should all retire at a relatively young age’, Castro told the US journalist Lee Lockwood in 1965.<sup>1</sup> Castro’s inability to live up to what he said back then has cost Cuba dearly. Certainly the Cuban elite are also responsible for not containing Fidel. Although the Soviet elite did not do this with Stalin either, in the early 1970s the elite political class in China did manage to moderate the excesses of the Cultural Revolution while Mao was still alive. The history of communist regimes has shown there are two models: a mobilising one –exercised by Stalin, Mao and Fidel– and another that is institutional –which ruled in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe starting in 1956 and above all in China and Vietnam in the last few decades–. The second model involves economic openness – radical in the Asian cases – and institutions that pay attention to the material needs of the people. The first –prone to ideological battles and visions of utopia– was buried with Stalin and Mao. The Cuban version will probably meet the same fate once the Commander is gone.

The political presuppositions of the ruling parties in these two models are quite different. So long as people stay out of politics, the latter –because of the priority it gives to the economy– tends to exert a less harsh kind of repression. The first model values history more than people and leads to great horrors, which are well-known in the cases of Stalin and Mao, but not so with Castro, although abuses in Cuba are admittedly not on the same scale as those of Stalin’s USSR and Mao’s China.<sup>2</sup>

In Cuba the first model predominated in the 1960s when the revolution was still fresh and most Cubans had embraced its ideals. The creation of the so-called new man –for whom the fatherland meant more than earthly interests– fuelled mobilisations to the countryside to cut sugarcane and to town squares to hear speeches by Fidel. Cuban socialism would not fester as this ideology did in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe because it would go on to encourage a new consciousness among people and establish a society based on solidarity. ‘We’re up to 10 million!’, proclaimed signs all over the island, referring to the tonnes of sugar that would be produced in 1970. But the sugarcane harvest came up short. It turned out to be 8.5 million tonnes and Cubans –in the words of Carlos Rafael Rodríguez, leader of the old Communist Party and a very prominent leader after 1959– expressed ‘supportive resignation’ that had little to do with the solidarity-minded consciousness that the government had aimed for.<sup>3</sup> The policy of mobilisations ruined the economy, subverted institutions and above all wasted the good will and trust –unprecedented in Cuban history– that the people had placed in the revolution.

In the 1970s Cuba moved towards the institutional model, although with Fidel Castro in charge it was never fully adopted. Still, one must not downplay the positive change this meant, compared to the 1960s, for the average Cuban and in terms of more plentiful consumer goods and an easing of pressure from mobilisations. Everyday life gradually acquired a certain degree of order thanks to the adoption of what Rudolf Bahro once called currently existing socialism. For the first time, the economy was subject to rules of planning elsewhere in force in the socialist camp and which, although ultimately riddled with intractable problems, introduced a system where before there had been just chaos. The new institutional framework did not allow for democratic give-and-take, but it

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<sup>1</sup> Lee Lockwood, *Castro’s Cuba*, Cuba’s Fidel, Boulder, Colorado, 1990, p. 188.

<sup>2</sup> *Cuban National Reconciliation*, a report published in 2003 by the Task Force on Memory, Truth and Justice, provides a good framework for discussing human rights violations by the governments of Cuba and the US as well as armed opposition to the revolution inside Cuba and in exile. The report, published by the Latin American and Caribbean Center at Florida International University in Miami ([http://www.cubaarchive.org/version\\_espanol/](http://www.cubaarchive.org/version_espanol/)) features data on the cost in human lives of the decades after the triumph of the Castro-led revolution.

<sup>3</sup> The sentence was spoken to this author on 6 June 1984 in response to a question about the 1960s.

was more understanding than the revolutionary heterodoxy of the 1960s: it did not ask Cubans to be heroes every day.<sup>4</sup> In its own way, Cuba seemed headed towards socialist normality.

In the mid-1980s, when Gorbachev was launching perestroika and glasnost in the Soviet Union, the Commander ended the cycle of the 70s, but did not step all the way back to the mobilisation model of the 60s. Outbreaks of mercantilism –never like those in the Hungary of that period, for instance– infuriated him and he ordered them stopped. ‘A communist spirit and conscience, a revolutionary calling and will, are and always will be a thousand times more powerful than money’, Fidel told a party congress in 1986.<sup>5</sup> The institutional model adopted as of 1970 had not transformed the Communist Party of Cuba into the real axis of power in Cuba; this was still the Commander. The shift –called a ‘rectification’– was not at all an initiative of the party, nor would it have emerged from its ranks without Castro. Once their charismatic leaders disappear, communist regimes tend towards normalisation and there is no reason to think Cuba would have been the exception had it lived through the 1980s with Raúl at the helm, or that the succession just now getting started will not break with Fidel’s inclinations.

### **Cuba After the Cold War**

The key political event on the island after the Cold War was the survival and reconstitution of the regime. If the wave of fervour that brought the Berlin Wall crashing down had also taken the Castro government with it, Cuba would have had to face –along with the old Soviet bloc– a transition towards democracy and capitalism. Around that time, Latin America was also entering a path towards democratisation and economic liberalisation. And Cuba would have shared both the hopes and the frustrations triggered by the so-called third wave of democracies. Instead, Cuba experienced a reconstitution that protected the regime against expectations to the contrary. Castro labelled the new era a ‘special period in times of peace’ and launched a programme to avert economic collapse and prevent a political crisis. Modest reforms eased state control of the economy and allowed people the right to engage in unlimited self-employment, while the Constitution was amended to permit several kinds of property ownership.<sup>6</sup> However, there were no political concessions similar to verified political pluralism.<sup>7</sup> Single-party rule continues to be the foundation of official Cuba. Although modest economic reforms loosened up the market, similar measures allowing for some political diversity were never authorised. In summary, the crisis weakened state control over economic activity, while at the same time the state retained formal control of the political sphere.

Even so, the reforms fell short given the range of proposals that emerged from the political elite itself in the early 1990s. These were the legalisation of small and mid-size companies, the separation of functions –but not powers– through the appointment of different people to be President and Secretary General of the Communist Party, as well as the creation of the post of Prime Minister, having some opposition figures join the National Assembly of Popular Power and changing the name of the party to Party of the Cuban Nation. But in 1995 the Commander halted the reforms: ‘All opening-up has brought us risks. If we must open up more and carry out more reforms, we will. For now they are not necessary’.<sup>8</sup> As the new century approached, the timid process of economic reforms was clearly sliding backwards. For example, licences were withdrawn for 40 kinds of paid work, including clowns, magicians, masseurs and travelling salesmen of articles such as soap, mousetraps and funeral floral arrangements. The reason given was that the state could provide these services more efficiently.<sup>9</sup>

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4 Jorge I. Domínguez, ‘Revolutionary Politics: The New Demand for Orderliness’, in Jorge I. Domínguez (Ed.), *Cuba: Internal and International Affairs*, Beverly Hills, 1982, p. 19-70.

5 *Central Report: Third Congress of the Communist Party of Cuba*, Havana, 1986.

6 Carmelo Mesa-Lago & Jorge F. Pérez-López, *Cuba’s Aborted Reform*, Gainesville, Florida, 2005.

7 Haroldo Dilla and Jorge I. Domínguez discuss the need for political reforms from different perspectives in *Democracy in Cuba and the Dispute with the United States*, coordinated by Haroldo Dilla, Havana, 1995.

8 *Cuba en el Mes*, September 1995, p. 6.

9 *BBC Mundo.com*, 27/IV/2004.

At the same time, a mobilising frenzy was resumed, with the battle of ideas as its slogan. Faced with the collapse of Marxism-Leninism and the leaders' refusal to undertake significant reforms, it comes as no surprise that a central role was granted to endogenous ideology –in other words, national sovereignty and social justice–. Cuba's rulers turned on the propaganda, keeping it up at high volume and with no limits until the proclamation of the transfer of power to Raúl. Every day Cuban television broadcast round table discussions on a variety of issues, such as the new revolutionaries in Latin America, the war in Iraq, criticism of Cuba from the old Human Rights Commission in Geneva and the case of five Cubans convicted of spying in the US.<sup>10</sup> Often people would be called on to gather in the main square of some town or city for what was called an Open Tribunal of the Revolution. Rallies in Revolution Square or along the Malecón in Havana were frequent. Revolutionary Vigilance Brigades made up of young people using mobile telephones travelled the island from one end to the other, watching and reporting in. The so-called Baraguá Pledge –alluding to a rebellion by General Antonio Maceo over the accord that ended unsuccessfully the pro-independence effort of the Ten Years War (1868-78)– was circulated in factories and neighbourhoods, schools and offices, committing signatories to defend the honour of the Fatherland whatever it might take.<sup>11</sup>

Starting in the 1990s, the gap between rhetoric and reality –present to one degree or another for decades– reached alarming levels. The Communist Party acknowledged as undesirable the ubiquitous double standard of saying one thing in public while thinking another privately –but did not show any will whatsoever to correct this with the full rule of law, the only antidote to the problem–. While everyday people struggle with the daily task of getting by, leaders –mainly Fidel– have refused to implement a complete economic restructuring and instead undertaken a battle of ideas against enemies both real and imagined, both at home and abroad. In the 1960s, when Cuban society was swept up in the revolution, or even after 1970, when the Cuban leadership tried to establish a normal kind of socialist state, the government enjoyed the support of large sectors of the population. In contrast, the twin aims of survival and reconstitution have magnified the distance between official Cuba and the vast majority of the people –including members of the regime and those who support it from the grassroots level– who are screaming out for substantial economic reforms.

The Cuban government could have opted for an alternative model of socialism, such as the radical economic restructuring that the communist parties of China and Vietnam have carried out successfully. But the Commander has resisted assuming the political consequences of far-reaching economic reforms. Castro despises market socialism almost as much as he does capitalism. An appeal to the effect of 'Getting rich is glorious!' such as Deng Xiaoping launched in China is inconceivable in Cuba because it goes against the revolutionary conscience and will. In Cuba, economic reforms were never deep or lasting, due to the lack of will of the ruling elite –with Fidel Castro at the forefront– to put the welfare of the Cuban people at the centre of the political system. Politics has worked against the economy. Therein lies the challenge that awaits Castro's successors: reversing, at least in part, the legacy of Castro and addressing the miserable everyday lives of the Cuban people.

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10 In early June of 2001, five of the 10 members of the *Red Avispa* (Wasp Network) were found guilty of 23 counts of espionage during a trial in Miami. None of the 12 members of the jury were Cuban-American. Defence attorneys are still pressing for a new trial on the grounds that Miami does not offer the necessary guarantees for an impartial trial. These five so-called heroes could be freed if there were an easing of tensions between Havana and Washington. The other five members that went on trial collaborated with US federal authorities and are serving reduced sentences.

11 The government invests an undisclosed amount of resources in these campaigns and mobilisations. Given the poor state of the economy and everyday hardships, diverting means and the loss of work days has a political cost. *Granma* (3/VII/2000) mentioned the delicate issue of resources being diverted to 'the battles' and said: 'It is actually much less than it might seem and is perfectly affordable for us, without sacrificing anything essential'.

## Raúl Castro's Interim Government

The proclamation of 31 July must be understood in the context of what has been happening since November 2005. It was then that Fidel gave an extremely long speech at the University of Havana that would go down as his political testament, assuming he is not returning to power. The battle of ideas, revolutionary ethics and socialism built with its own tools –without resorting to the market– are the driving forces behind his legacy.<sup>12</sup> Throughout the first half of 2006, there were unusual behind-the-scenes movements in the government. In particular, the restoration of the Secretariat of the Communist Party, repeated statements describing the party as the ‘true successor’ and a media offensive honouring Raúl on his 75th birthday drew attention.

The government got high marks in the initial phase of the transfer of power, even if it was only because it did not simply collapse. A truly collective leadership was established. In September 2006, Havana hosted smoothly the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement. The Cuban Workers Federation and the Federation of University Students held their congresses. A new fight was undertaken against corruption –something that has been around since the 1960s– and this sits well with population. Off the record, official sources say a party congress will be held in early 2008,<sup>13</sup> even though the party has not held one since 1997. Although the party's bylaws do not set a timetable, it would have been normal for such a congress to have been held in 2002 or 2003. The main reason for the delay has been Castro's reluctance to engage in serious discussions about the economy and therefore to take up again the reforms of the 1990s and deepen them.

The tone of official discourse, meanwhile, has eased somewhat. Raúl ends his speeches by saying ‘¡Viva Cuba Libre!’ (Long Live Free Cuba) and not ‘¡Patria o Muerte, Venceremos!’ (Fatherland or Death, we shall Prevail!). Often the most popular soap opera of the day is broadcast at 8:30pm sharp, rather than the annoying Round Table discussion. Results, vigour and transparency appear to be the favourite words of Raúl. Fortunately, neither Raul nor any other successor is charismatic and they have no choice but to govern with an eye to improving the wretched everyday lives of the Cuban people. In fact, this interim government brought about an economic debate that has not been observed since the early 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

Also unusual was the debate triggered in early 2007 by a televised tribute to Commissar Luis Pavón –former President of the National Council of Culture in the 1970s– and the re-emergence of two other well-known figures of cultural repression in that period, Jorge Serguera and Armando Quesada. The intellectual community focusing on Cuba quickly responded by sending e-mails asking the Cuban Institute of Radio and Television to rectify its account of the lives of Pavón, Serguera (ex-Director of the institute) and Quesada (an official of the National Council of Culture whose job it was to ‘clean up’ the world of Cuban theatre at the time). In a statement issued in mid-January, the National Union of Writers and Artists said the controversial appearance of these men did not reflect an official policy and that grave mistakes had been committed. Just like the economic reforms of the 1990s, this debate and the response of the union of writers and artists came up short. Pavón, Serguera and Quesada were appointed to their posts by the Communist Party, and did not act on their own. No one questioned the party hierarchy, which had in fact fuelled that policy of repression. Nor did any one speak out in defence of the intellectuals who had fallen in disgrace or even been jailed. Even so, the battery of messages –which spread through Cuba and the diaspora and included a message of support for the intellectuals from Mariela Castro Espín (daughter of Raúl and Vilma Espín)– laid clear what the consequences would be for intellectuals who had not broken with the regime if the idea was to return to 1970s-style repression.<sup>15</sup>

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12 Speech given by Fidel Castro, President of Cuba, at a ceremony marking the 60th anniversary of his having begun his university studies, on 17 November 2005 (<http://www.cuba.cu/gobierno/discursos/2005/esp/171105e.html>).

13 *Financial Times*, 23/I/2007.

14 *Wall Street Journal*, 10/I/2007.

15 See *Encuentro en la red* (cubaencuentro.com) of January and February 2007 to access documents related to the debate triggered by the resurrection of Pavón, Serguera and Quesada.

## The International Context

After the triumph of the revolution, international relations took on a critical importance. Were it not for its alliance with the then Soviet Union, the government of Fidel Castro probably would not have survived the 1960s. At the same time, the emergence of the so-called Third World allowed the island to broaden its international links, just as the US imposed the trade embargo and persuaded Latin American governments –except Mexico– to join in its policy of isolating Cuba. In the 1990s, Havana managed to survive conditions as dangerous –albeit with a different kind of menace– as those it faced in the early 60s. By the end of the decade, however, the regime had reconstituted itself and the international context became more favourable to Cuba. There are many examples of how the Cuban government has managed to manipulate international relations to its favour throughout the decades.

The US's stubborn policy towards Cuba is without a doubt the flip-side of the longevity of the Commander's government. The greatest achievement of US policy has been to strengthen the ideological mainstay of Cuba under Castro: defence of national sovereignty. Since 31 July, on two occasions Raúl Castro has raised the possibility of dialogue with the US.<sup>16</sup> The response from the Bush Administration was to hammer away at the current policy of abstention until Havana undertakes a transition towards democracy. The US has been longing for stability in Cuba since the 19<sup>th</sup> century and it is clear that today an orderly succession would be the best guarantor of this. Why can't the succession set the stage for a democratic Cuba? One might ask if it is this Administration or the next one that will be able to formulate a policy based on reasons of State and not just electoral posturing. The current policy would only be applied in the most unlikely of scenarios: the total collapse of the regime and a transition towards democracy over the short term.

Even so, Cuba is not simply a victim of US arrogance. Especially after the Cold War ended, the Commander could have facilitated detente with the US through the full application of the proposals we have mentioned. After all, Vietnam undertook its reforms in the mid-1980s, when it was still being ostracised for its invasion of Cambodia. By the early 1990s, Europe, Canada and even the US had normalised their relations with Hanoi. Improving relations between Washington and Havana does not depend just on the US modifying its aims, but also on Cuba forcing Washington's hand a bit.

Therefore, one of the keys to easing tensions with the US is in Havana. If Raúl Castro were to open up the economy, even just to roll back the many obstacles that have sapped self-employment, Washington might respond. Democrats control the US Congress and they would probably force a debate on Cuba policy that until then the Republican majority had been blocking. Meanwhile, the tragedy in Iraq could clear a path for Cuba in Washington. John Negroponte –Deputy Secretary of State and former Ambassador to Baghdad– knows very well what has happened in Iraq and might therefore take it upon himself to try to change the single-minded US policy towards Cuba. The 'measured steps' conceived by the Clinton Administration –the engagement attempted by the EU, Canada and the Latin America that never backed Fidel Castro– might come to life without him.

Furthermore, the transition in Miami has already started, although this is not completely evident because the first Cuban exiles still make up the majority of the electoral census. But those who left starting in the 1980s now represent a majority of future voters who might favour a gradual change in US policy. For instance, 55% oppose the restrictions imposed in 2004 on travel and remittances, while 63% of those who arrived before 1980 support them. To a large extent the difference lies in that some of these Cubans still have relatives on the island and the others do not. The remittances would take on even more importance if there were an economic opening with the island. The synergy of this along with the small pools of capital held by Cubans in Miami would quickly improve living conditions on the island. Both Havana and Washington should take note of the

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<sup>16</sup> First in an interview published in *Granma* on 18 August 2006 and then in *Revolution Square* on 2 December 2006 at ceremonies marking the 50th anniversary of Granma and his brother's 80th birthday.

emerging profile of Cubans in south Florida. If there were an economic détente with the island, major sectors of the Cuban community could join appeals to the US government for a new policy towards Cuba.

In the 1990s, Latin America was on the path to democratisation and market-based economic reforms. Despite diplomatic ties between Cuba and most Latin American countries, the political breach between Cuba and the region seemed to be widening irreversibly. At the end of the decade the wind began to shift in favour of the Commander and his government. Economic liberalisation failed to make significant progress in raising the living standards of most people, causing frustration and disenchantment. Hugo Chávez's election as President of Venezuela in 1998 was the first triumph of the new populism that would later bring to power Evo Morales (Bolivia), Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua) and Rafael Correa (Ecuador). Suddenly, the turn Cuba took in the mid-1990s – resistance to economic reforms and waging the battle of ideas – was backed by the new populisms. These movements and a Cuba that had undertaken economic restructuring probable would not have forged the alliances that have emerged today.

Chávez and the Commander could not be more alike. They share the same vision of politics: 'visionary' leaders like them must show the masses the path to follow. Castro admires Chavez's skill in undermining democracy by manipulating its own rules; Chávez, at the same time, is highly respectful of Fidel's ability to survive. Raúl Castro plays in a completely different league. Since he has no charisma, nor does he fancy himself a visionary, he has focused all his efforts on institutions –the armed forces mainly, but also the Communist Party–. As he lacks the ability to lead the masses charging into victory and would not even try without his brother Fidel, his only hope is to reach out to the healthy interest that all of us human beings possess –and the Cubans of the island are no different– in improving our lot in life through our own efforts. While his brother would grow furious with the get-rich appeal of Deng Xiaoping, Raúl probably applauded in silence.

Raúl and Chávez are very different from each other. The world tours that Chavez makes stirring up anti-US sentiment please the Commander and probably Raúl as well. But the latter, once he took over power, would have to turn his energy to improving living standards. The battle of ideas cannot be his main political tool, and in fact this is already happening. Nor could he conduct foreign policy the way the Commander has. It is hard to say exactly how the relationship between Chávez and Raúl will play out in the future, but it is clear that there is potential for tension. If it opens up the economy, Raúl's government would have to give priority to Cuba's economic interests and relegate at least partially its international agitation against imperialism.

### **Cuba after Fidel Castro**

Although he could die any minute, Castro seems to be recovering. The possibility of his returning to power must be the worst of nightmares for his successors and of course for the Cuban people. If he returns, even if just partially, the ruling elite would have two options: again take on a secondary role, mainly in relation to economic reforms, or for the first time contain the Commander and rule in a way that reduces the gap between official rhetoric and the reality of people's everyday lives. Sooner or later the elite are going to enter uncharted waters and govern on their own, which means establishing new rules for achieving a consensus and resolving conflicts among themselves without the omnipotent presence of Fidel. Nor could they ignore the results of a Gallup poll conducted in late 2006 that said that 75% of those questioned feel they do not have enough freedom to decide what to do with their lives and 40% state openly that they disapprove of their leaders.<sup>17</sup>

One can assume that most members of the ruling elite know they cannot stay in power forever and may be developing a new perspective, a sort of acceptance that some day they will have to shift into the political opposition. Economic reforms have provided many of them with the prospect of a

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<sup>17</sup> For logistical reasons, the poll was conducted only in Havana and Santiago de Cuba, the country's two main cities. More than 75% of the Cuban population lives in urban areas.



comfortable retirement, so to speak, especially those members of the armed forces and the Interior Ministry who possess –either they themselves or their children– stakes in joint-venture companies with foreign capital. In the early 1990s some sectors of the ruling elite seemed willing to adopt economic restructuring and even a cautious political opening. But those proposals never materialised and today the old revolutionary truths are increasingly frayed.

The key question is whether the regime that replaces the current one will manage to stabilise a new status quo similar to that of China or Vietnam. Much time has been wasted in Cuba, especially in the 1990s, and this may have caused irreparable damage to prospects for reform over the long term. However, things could stabilise if the elite reached a consensus on economic restructuring, the people gave this new model a chance and remained relatively calm, and if the reforms worked fairly quickly –enough for the new leaders to get a grip on legitimacy–. Assuring Cubans breakfast, lunch and dinner is no small feat.

If Castro's successors do not manage to stabilise a new order, they might see themselves forced to carry out some kind of political opening. One of the possible scenarios for a transition in Cuba is that of violent change, forced from below, and with the prospect of some kind of intervention by the US. In light of this, a peaceful transition from above would be a pragmatic manoeuvre: the ruling elite would call truly free and fair elections rather than have to turn to massive repression of popular uprisings, an option that could provoke foreign intervention. Of course, competitive elections carry with them some risk because there is no guarantee of victory. 'Much life remains after losing an election', former US President Jimmy Carter is said to have told Daniel Ortega after the Sandinistas lost elections in 1990. Cuba's ruling elite should pay attention, as both Carter and the Sandinistas have remained in public life for a long time after losing power. Ortega has even come back as President of Nicaragua.

Another possible scenario is that, acting in its own interest, the ruling elite commit to the rule of law, civil liberties and free elections. After all, they would not want a government that does to them what they have done to the opposition for many decades. Furthermore, they would find support for that new political will among the enormous mass of professionals and government workers –and among the Cuban people in general, who do not really back the regime–. Those who openly oppose the government are a numerically small minority, and after the repression of March and April 2003, this sector is very weak. In general, Cuban society is exhausted and would welcome the opportunity to live in peace.

If these commitments take place, it would be a crucial step towards putting Cuba on the road to democratisation and the building of institutions. One of the biggest challenges of government leaders would be to get everyday Cubans to listen to them and commit to the founding of a new Cuba. Double standards and very widespread disenchantment with politics mean big obstacles to overcome for a new class of politicians. A China-Vietnam scenario would also face similar obstacles, except that a Cuba in transition would be headed towards freedom and this would involve an open relationship between the government and the citizens.

But let us be realistic. Even if a transition takes place and it advances with few stumbles, a 50-year-old political culture with deep roots in pre-1959 Cuba is not going to vanish overnight. Castro has ruled through networks of personal loyalties as much or even more than he has through institutions. At the same time, concentric circles of loyalty arrangements throughout the hierarchy have been as important as the institutions; in other words, the men (there are very few women) closest to the Commander have their own networks of loyalties, and so on. Castro has brought up entire generations of politicians in a culture of bosses and cronyism and this will last, no matter what happens. Cuba therefore could be ripe for populist movements. Building counterweights that are intrinsic to democracy so as to consolidate it would thus be a tough battle, and a so-called hybrid



arrangement could emerge in Cuban politics.<sup>18</sup> The current circumstances seem to push the balance in favour of this kind of outcome.

What kind of political class will surface in Cuba? In a China-Vietnamese type scenario, would the Communist Party support someone like Deng Xiaoping? If a democratic transition takes place over the short or medium term, what kind of leaders will come to the fore? Is there a Hugo Chávez among the young officers of the Cuban military? Will there be a Leonel Fernández, who ruled in the Dominican Republic in the late 1990s and came back in 2004, or an Arnoldo Alemán, who is under house arrest for corruption during his stint as President of Nicaragua and who went from being a bitter enemy of Ortega to observing a tacit alliance with the Sandinistas? Will a Lula emerge, or an Evo Morales, who in the Cuban case would highlight the interest of black Cubans? When the time is right, the answers to these questions will tell us if Cuba has embarked on a real transition to democracy or, to the contrary, has settled into a hybrid regime.

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<sup>18</sup> Thomas Carothers, 'The End of the Transition Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, January 2002, p. 5-21.